

A Survivor:
Essa's Story



A Survivor: Ella's Story

To my amazing Nagymami, who survived the unthinkable and continues to inspire me each day.

This story is for current and future generations of my family. This is the life of my grandmother and the years she spent during the Shoa. Her strength, determination, kindness and devotion remain an example to us all.

The Family

Parents

Helen [nee Rosenberg] and
Salomon (Yekutiel) Baumöhl

Children

1912 Arthur (Avraham)
1914 Zoltan (Israel Chaim)
1920 Ella (Chaya Sarah)
1922 Adel [called Dutsie] (Dvorah)
1924 Clara (Miriam Leah)
1926 Magda [called Adele] (Adina)
1928 Vera (Taube)
1930 Ignatz (Yitzchak)
1932 Agnes (Esther)

An Exciting Childhood

Ella was born in Sajóvárkony, Hungary and moved to Eger after a few months. The apartment contained a kitchen, large room, parents' bedroom, and an outhouse bathroom. The oldest brother, Avraham, was excused from the mandatory army service because of bad eyesight. He later went to Israel in 1935. Zoltan (Zoli) left a good profession and went into the army in 1938. In the same year, Ella went to Budapest, a long way from home at 18 years old.

Budapest

Ella was a 3 hour train ride from her family, but wanted to learn a profession. Zoli knew of a family who owned a store that sold hand-made things, and it seemed the perfect opportunity for Ella, who wanted to learn how to sew. Ella was excited to live with the Weiss family, but she soon came to realize that it wasn't as she had hoped. The experience turned out to be horrible, as the family basically made Ella become a servant for them. The family made her do housework and treated her horribly. During that one year, the salespeople were also jealous of her because the customers liked her so much. Mrs. Weiss was especially mean to her.

Ella didn't want to tell her family about the horrible situation, but fortunately her aunt came to visit and saw the conditions. When Ella went home for Passover, her family wouldn't let her go back to the Weiss family.

Zoli was discharged from the army and found Ella a small room in Budapest. Ella went with her sister Dutsie and cousin Zita to learn how to

make bedding and clothes. Ella was able to quickly find a job in a very prestigious custom-made shirt shop, working right under the seamstress's supervision.

Growing Anti-Semitism in Hungary

In the early 1940's, about 15-20% of the residents of Eger were Jewish. In 1942 Ella came home with Dutsie because the family needed her in their store. Their sister Clara went to Budapest. During this time, the Baumöhl family heard about anti-semitic incidents in Germany, but they were so far removed that it didn't affect them. But things were about to change.

In 1942, cousin Silvi escaped from occupied Bratislava, Slovakia after her family was taken away by the Nazis. Ella's family had tried to give her a Hungarian identity card using one of the girls' birth certificates.

March 19, 1944 – Germany invaded Hungary. Now things began to change abruptly for the family. In April, Jews had to start wearing yellow stars. Silvi's sister (who remained in Bratislava as a worker) sent a message that authorities thought that all the Jews were taken, and it was safe for Silvi to return home. So, Silvi decided to return home, but both sisters

were caught and taken to concentration camp. (Silvi wound up surviving, but no one else in her family did).

Soon after the law enforcing Jews to wear stars, new laws began to appear. There was to be no Jewish leadership in government and business area. The family had to close their store, and shopping for Jews was only allowed during certain hours. Ella had to return the fabric to the customers because she was no longer allowed to sew. Pretty soon, Jews were forbidden to travel.

A Love Story

A year earlier, in 1943, Ella went to visit her brother Zoli in a labor camp in Košice. While there, she went to buy supplies for the family store. The store owner was helping her, while the accountant saw the beautiful girl and approached her. Smitten, he offered to show her around Košice. This man was named Karl Pollak. They fell instantly in love and exchanged letters back and forth over the coming months.

In February of 1944, Ella and her father went to Košice to visit Karl's family. The times were so uncertain - they decided to get engaged right away.

The Ghetto

In May of 1944, posters were placed in the city, announcing the news – all Jews were to move to the ghetto in Eger.

The ghetto was separated from the rest of the city by wooden barriers. The 9 family members shared a room in one apartment. There were two ghettos in Eger, and the Baumöhl family was in the smaller one. They stayed in this apartment for about 2-3 weeks. Everyone was forced to work and had to travel about 6 miles to the brick factory. At first, they took just the young but soon the old had to work as well. Everyone had to walk, no matter how bad the weather was.

On June 9th, everyone was forced to go to the Eger train station.

Rumors said that the Russian army was fighting the Germans, and the Hungarians were optimistic that the Russians would liberate them. In the meantime, however, the Hungarian police were eager to help the Nazis.

A non-Jewish friend wanted to hide Ella, but she wouldn't hear of it. There was no way she would leave her family. Things started to happen so quickly. Ella's grandmother had a non-Jewish maid who hid some of their belongings, including Ella's engagement ring. Other non-Jews hid some things, but after the war nothing was returned.

At the train station in Eger, all the Jews were packed in cattle train cars. There was one bucket for all the people in the car to relieve themselves. They felt as though they were being stripped of their humanity. No one could have ever imagined what fate was awaiting them.

Camp

The Jews were told they were going to work, and arrived in Auschwitz 3 days later. During the ride the train would stop periodically to throw out the dead bodies. No one ate for 3 days.

Upon arrival in Auschwitz, men were immediately separated from women. A Polish prisoner yelled at them, "How could you be so stupid? How could you come here?"

Ella's father and younger brother, who was only 13 years old, were separated. Ella stood with her mother and the other children arm in arm. The infamous Dr. Mengele, a handsome man but among the most wicked of them all, walked by and ripped out Ella, Clara, and Dutsie. He told them that the mother and the small children would go somewhere else and they would all meet in the evening. Ella never saw them again.

Inhumanity

Everyone was told to undress, and the SS officers took everything from them. While being watched by the SS men, they were forced to shave their heads, arms, and entire bodies of hair. They each got an individual tattoo. Ella tried to stay with her younger sisters; she desperately wanted to give them hope.

They were quickly taken to the showers. Everything was happening so quickly, the SS constantly yelled at them to hurry. No one knew what would come out of the shower heads.

Ella thought that she would get her clothes returned after the showers. Instead, they were each given rags to wear. The sisters tried to refuse, but Ella calmed them. She still thought she would soon see her mother and the little ones.

They were taken to Birkenau, to a room with 3 level bunk beds. Again, Ella desperately tried to remain together with her 2 sisters.

The next morning they lined up in 5 rows and stood for hours. Again and again, they were forced to stand, despite rain and cold, while the SS counted them. Even the SS women were ruthless.

Eating consisted of thin coffee, given to the prisoners in buckets with little tin cups. Once a day they were given a small slice of bread with margarine. Sometimes they were given a horrible soup-like mixture. Some tried to save the ration, and others would often steal it. There was nothing to eat the food with. Rarely, they were given a small piece of meat, but Clara wouldn't eat it because it wasn't kosher.

In the camp, the Jews lost all concept of time. They were divided into groups to work, but it was not very productive work: carrying bricks, piling up hay, etc. The smell of smoke filled the air day and night; Ella knew it was the smell of burning bodies.

The SS came around with dogs, and sent dogs on people if they didn't work fast enough. They specifically tortured one pretty Russian girl to death, to make an example of her. Clara

screamed, saying she would rather die than watch this inhumanity.

In July, Ella got very sick. She was brought to the infirmary and put in isolation – it was typhoid fever. She was lying on the highest bunk in the room and barely ate for the 6 weeks she was there.

During the time in the infirmary, Dr. Mengele would make the patients run around the large room naked as part of the selection process. Ella was selected three times, but something always went wrong and she wasn't taken. The few that were chosen were never seen again.

At one point, Ella started to feel better. She got off the bed and started to walk around, but she had high fevers and started hallucinating. In her dreams, she saw wagons that were taking her home with her family. She told the others in the infirmary – at first they thought she was crazy. But Ella believed it so strongly, that soon the others started to believe that it might be true.

After 6 weeks, Ella was released and sent back to her bunk. Her sisters were taken away the day before. She assumed everyone was dead.

Liberation

Ella was in Birkenau for one year, then the evacuation marches started. Bergen-Belsen, Braunschweig, Bendorf. Fourteen days of marching from place to place. Ella had pneumonia the whole time. Then suddenly the SS disappeared – they were liberated. It all happened so quickly, and she was soon on a train with the Swiss Red Cross waiting to go to Denmark. As she saw her reflection in the window for the first time, she thought to herself, “Is this really me?” It was a strange, unfamiliar face – not unlike a horse. Ella couldn’t believe it was her own reflection staring back at her.

From Copenhagen, Ella took a boat to Malmö, Sweden. The Red Cross set her up with a job in Stockholm, where she worked in a clothing factory as a dressmaker. All the time, she desperately tried to find out what happened to her family.

The Red Cross posted lists of survivors and Ella searched through them, looking for familiar names. She found Karl, and wrote him a letter. Karl was recovering in a hospital in Budapest.

He had been liberated from camp in Germany.
It wasn't long before Ella would be able to start
her life anew with Karl – practically the only
family she had left in the world.

After the War

Ella soon discovered the terrible news – her entire family was destroyed in the camps. Her sister Clara had actually survived, but died shortly after liberation. Trying hard to find some normalcy in the world, she and Karl rented an apartment in Košice and started a family of their own. They had 3 amazing girls: Alice, Judit and Vera, and lived in Košice until 1968. During the Russian invasion, the family was able to escape communist Czechoslovakia and start a new life in the Jewish homeland, Israel.

Nagymami lost Karl in 1975 due to his deteriorating heart condition. After living on her own for four years she met Hillel Klein. They had 21 happy years together.

Today, Nagymami enjoys her seventeen grandchildren and three great-grandkids. Family and friends love and respect Nagymami/Savta Ella. Her sincere faith, humanity and loving kindness is an everlasting inspiration to all.



The Baumöhl family before the war



Ella and Karl on their wedding day



After the war, in Košice

Written by Janie Fossner, 2003